Silenced Forest: Erasure of Non-Human Life in Government Discourse on IKN

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ABSTRACT

The relocation of Indonesian capital city from Jakarta to East Kalimantan raises a controversy in which the government needs to spread information about IKN to avoid misunderstanding through their official website. The way the government depict IKN and how it is related to the environmental awareness is suitable to be investigated further. Therefore, the researchers aim to investigate how non-human entities are linguistically omitted or marginalized in official discourse about IKN. Utilizing ecolinguistics within an ecological discourse analysis (EDA) framework, the study analyzes 34 articles from the official IKN website, covering discourse from 2019 to 2025. Results reveal three erasure categories—void, mask, and trace—that systematically obscure or marginalize the non-human life. Such linguistic strategies significantly influence public perception, reinforcing anthropocentric narratives and potentially weakening ecological consciousness. The findings highlight the necessity for more vivid ecological representations to foster genuine environmental sustainability.

Silenced Forest: Erasure of Non-Human Life in Government Discourse on IKN
Famala Eka Sanhadi Rahayu, Muhammad Hasyim, Muhammad Bahri Arifin
DOI

367

Keywords: erasure, non-human life, IKN, ecolinguistics

INTRODUCTION

The relocation of a country's capital city is a big and somehow debatable move taken by the government. Like other countries which already moved their capital city due to various reasons such as overpopulation, natural disasters, strategic reasons and so on, Indonesia begins this big move in 2019 (Hackbarth & Vries, 2021; Rossman, 2018). At that time, President Jokowi decides to move the capital city in Sepaku, Penajam Paser Utara, East Kalimantan. Surely this decision is followed with controversy or debates which shows how important this issue.

The debates are coming from people who agree that Jakarta is already vulnerable to be Indonesia's capital city with its unsolved problems such as overpopulation, water shortage, massive traffic congestion, and other problem surroundings Jakarta (Ishenda & Guoqing, 2019; Syaban & Appiah-Opoku, 2023; Yahya, 2018)). On the one's hand, the opposite voice claims that moving the capital city to East Kalimantan will make environmental degradation in East Kalimantan more severed, East Kalimantan is already faced many environmental problems such as illegal logging, deforestation, illegal mining, and illegal hunting which have not been solved satisfactorily (Baniargi, Larasati, & Yuniningsih, 2022). Therefore, moving the capital city to East Kalimantan will only add a new list of environmental degradation to this area.

The discussions and controversies surrounding Ibukota Khusus Nusantara (IKN) highlight the importance of language in the discourse, an aspect of ecolinguistic research. Ecolinguistics is an emerging discipline that combines linguistics, ecology, and discourse analysis to investigate the linguistic and ideological aspects of environmental discourse (Stibbe, 2014). According to Alexander and Stibbe (2014:105), "ecolinguistics is the study of the impact of language on the essential relationships among humans, other organisms, and the physical environment." Ecolinguistics, similar to critical discourse analysis (CDA), seeks to uncover the underlying assumptions present in dominant societal discourses (Stibbe, 2014:119). The CDA aims to elevate consciousness of social inequalities and promote social change, whereas ecolinguistics and EDA utilize linguistic analysis to uncover and highlight discourses harmful to the environment (Stibbe, 2014: 119).

This study uses ecolinguistics, an interdisciplinary framework that examines the relationship between language and ecological concepts. Ecolinguistics seeks to clarify how linguistic patterns either enhance or undermine the well-being of the natural environment and its

inhabitants, including both human and non-human creatures. It builds upon systemic functional linguistics, critical discourse analysis, and cognitive linguistics by integrating ecological values and environmental ideologies (Stibbe, 2015).

Facing pros and contras arguments about the relocation of new capital city makes government needs to articulate their version of the problem being discussed. The government then creates an official website for IKN (Ibu Kota Nusantara, in the English version, usually referred to as Nusantara Capital City) that is https://ikn.go.id/. In this website, the government spreads information related to the relocation and development of IKN. It functions as an official government media to shape people's perception of IKN.

The Indonesian government promotes IKN as a sustainable and eco-friendly city through its discourses, which are published at https://ikn.go.id/. However, the government discourse often centers on infrastructure, economic progress, and urban innovation, while nonhuman life is backgrounded or entirely erased.

The process of intentionally backgrounding or erasing something important is called erasure. According to Stibbe (2015:145), erasure is a systematic absence of certain participants from a text, a discourse, or across multiple discourses that tell a story in itself– that those participants are unimportant, irrelevant or marginal. This "erasure" term is similar to suppression, backgrounding, exclusion and abstraction (Fairclough, 2003; van Leeuwen, 2008).

According to Stibbe (2014), erasure can be divided into three categories: the void, the mask and the trace. The void is where 'something important' is absent or erased completely from the discourse. The mask is where 'something important' is mentioned in the discourse, but in a distorted way. Erasure is not a binary all-or-nothing phenomenon and can occur to different degrees. Of particular importance is the 'trace'- when discourses represent the natural world but do so in an obscure way, leaving a faint trace rather than a vivid image. In a discourse talking about development and infrastructure, it is common to background or erase non-human life as if it is not significant. It is possible to describe several linguistic ways that animals and plants are erased and describe a hierarchy of erasure, from the most vivid to the most obscuring. The most vivid representation is an image which can visually evoke the representation of the thing inside people's minds (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The stronger form of erasure occurs when superordinates replace the names of species, for example, birds rather than peacocks, trees instead of oaks and so on. In sum, the more abstract the word is, the higher the degree of erasure in the discourse.

Many research studies have already studies about erasure on different topics, such as the erasure of disability (Andrew et al., 2019), transgender in the healthcare system (Bauer et al., 2009), and the representation of Islam in the Middle Ages (Rajabzadeh, 2019). Most of the previous studies investigated erasure in social affairs. Few of them investigated ecological issues, let alone analysing a government's discourse on relocating a capital city, which is framed as a forest city. Previous studies have typically overlooked government discourses in the context of urban development, leaving a critical gap in understanding how official narratives shape ecological awareness. Therefore, the present research aims to fill the gap by analyzing how non-human entities are linguistically omitted or marginalized in official discourse about IKN?

METHOD
1. Research Design
This research employs a qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach from an ecolinguistics viewpoint to investigate how non-human entities are linguistically omitted or marginalized in official discourse about IKN. The research posits that language both reflects reality and actively shapes ecological consciousness while legitimizing particular concepts.

2. Research Instruments
The research instruments are AntConc and NVivo, which function as tools that help the researcher in doing the analysis. The key instruments of this research are the researchers themselves.

3. Data Data Source
The source of data are taken from an official Indonesian government https://ikn.go.id/. This research used purposive sampling to decide which articles in the website will be included as the suitable source of data for this research. Purposive sampling was used because the goal of this research is to look into how non-human life gets erased from environmental discourses. The sampling techniques are as follows:

1) The researchers choose English version of the article in the website and save all the articles from the beginning of the announcement of the relocation (2019) to the date (2025) into pdf,

2) From those articles the researchers choose texts which explicitly mention environment or environmental except the ones in the minister and ministry name. The researchers used AntConc to search for the term in 104 articles and found 34 articles mentioned about environment and/or environmental explicitly. The study

Silenced Forest: Erasure of Non-Human Life in Government Discourse on IKN
Famala Eka Sanhadi Rahayu, Muhammad Hasyim, Muhammad Bahri Arifin
DOI

370

makes sure that the data it looks at is directly related to how ecological themes and entities are represented or left out of official narratives by only choosing articles that include "environment" or "environmental." This specific strategy is needed to find little patterns of erasure that might be missed in larger or less concentrated sampling methods.

3) These 34 articles are then considered as the data source of this study. The data of this research are in the form of words, phrases or clauses which linguistically shows how non-human life are omitted from the discourse.

Table 1
List of Articles as Data Source

Title of the Articles	Codes
Indonesia Learns from Brazil's Experience in Relocating Its Capital City	IKN1
Minister Bambang Outlines Timeline for New Capital City Development During Media Discussions	IKN2
Bappenas Holds National Dialogue on South Kalimantan's Potential as New Capital City Location	IKN3
Ministry of National Development Planning/Bappenas Hosts National Dialogue on New State Capital	IKN4
Bappenas Invites Senior Dayak Figures to Collect Input on State Capital Relocation	IKN5
National Dialogue on State Capital Relocation Highlights Central Kalimantan's Environmental, Social and Cultural Aspects	IKN6
Minister Bambang: Kalimantan's Development Will Focus on Improving Growth Rate, Economic Diversification and Environmental Preservation	IKN7
Bappenas Discusses Results of East Kalimantan Feasibility Study at National Dialogue Event	IKN8
Bappenas Discusses Role of Omnibus Law in Smoothening State Capital Relocation Processs	IKN9
Indonesia Infrastructure Week 2019 Aims to Foster Greater Partnerships in Fulfilling Development Targets	IKN10
New State Capital to Implement Forest City Concept, Prioritizing Environmental Factors	IKN11
Bappenas Holds End-of-Year Press Conference to Announce Government's Plans for 2021, SDG Achievements and Economic Transformation Results	IKN12
State Capital's Construction Key to National and Regional Growth	IKN13
Minister Suharso Advocates Environmental Conservation In Every Step of IKN Development	IKN14
Minister Suharso Discusses State Capital Development With Architects and Development Experts	IKN15
Public Consultation Sessions Held in Makassar and Medan to Welcome Academic Input into State Capital Draft Bill	IKN16

Bappenas Conveys President's Final Thoughts on the State Capital Project Development	IKN17
University of Indonesia Reviews Nusantara Development	IKN18
Chairman of NCA Invites ASPI to Participate in Development of Nusantara as a Smart and Sustainable City	IKN19
Indonesia Commitment to Green Energy Transition in the Development of Nusantara at Hannover Messe 2023	IKN20
Handling Illegal Mining, Nusantara and Law Enforcement Officials Form Task Force	IKN21
Nusantara Capital Authority Holds Groundbreaking for Phase 4	IKN22
Digital Warehousing Facilities Will Soon Be Available in Nusantara	IKN23
The UK Government Expresses Interest in Supporting Nusantara as a Carbon-Neutral City	IKN24
The Nusantara Capital Authority Participates in Hannover Messe 2024: Driving Investment Cooperation for Sustainable Development	IKN25
Second Day of Hannover Messe 2024: Nusantara Capital Authority Explores Potential Cooperation in Environmentally Friendly Technology	IKN26
NCA Helds Soft Launching of Biodiversity Management Master Plan to Participate in Global Environmental Campaign	IKN27
NCA Receives LoI from SGC Holding Group and TechnoGIS at Hannover Messe 2024	IKN28
NCA Establishes Collaboration with Canberra Authority, Agrees on Commitment for Capital Development Cooperation	IKN29
Nusantara Fair 2024 Closed with Enthusiasm	IKN30
NCA: Nusantara Development on Target, Total Investment Reaches IDR 47.5 Trillion	IKN31
The United States Trade and Development Agency (USTDA) Collaborates with the Nusantara Capital City Authority (NCA) to Organize Nusantara Procurement & Project Management Training Workshop	IKN32
About Nusantara	IKN33
Nusantara International Partners Visit 2025 Opens, Chairman of Nusantara Capital Authority Reaffirm The Continuation of Nusantara Capital City Development	IKN34

4. Data Collection

The researchers undergo several steps in collecting the data, as follows:

1) The researchers collectively put the data source into NVivo to perform the coding process.
2) The coding label is made based on the erasure patterns (Fairclough, 2003; Stibbe, 2015; van Leeuwen, 2008) in the text, such as nominalization, passives, presupposition, hyponym, metonymy, metaphor, and transitivity.

3) The researchers coded the words, phrases or clauses which match the criteria of erasure patterns. Then the researchers mapped the findings into three categories based on Stibbe (2014): the void, the mask, and the trace. This data is kept in NVivo project for further analysis.

5. Data Analysis

When analysing the data, the researchers follow three steps from Miles and Hubermen (1994) as follows:

1) Data Reduction. In data reduction, the researchers have already collected the data and then sorted it out to find which data are relevant and which are not.

2) Data Display. After sorting out and finding the condensed patterns, these findings are tabulated to allow the researchers to see the findings as a whole, which can lead to a better conclusion. Not only tabulated, but the researchers also quoted the data for further explanations.

3) Conclusion Drawing. The researchers analyze the data as a whole to reveal what is behind the data or what the data infer to reveal what is inferred behind the erasure of non-human life in the IKN-related discourse.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to Stibbe (2015: 146), "Erasure is a story in people's minds that an area of life is unimportant or unworthy of consideration. It is a phenomenon when an important thing is erased, suppressed or backgrounded so that its existence is not considered. In a discourse about economic and infrastructure development, it is likely to neglect, erase or background the existence of non-human life. Even if they are presented in the discourse, their role might be distorted and marginalized. A similar thing is found in Indonesian government discourse taken from their official website https://ikn.go.id/. In these discourses, non-human life is erased through the use of nominalization, presupposition, abstraction, passives or even omission. These erasures are mapped into three categories of erasure; they are the void, the mask, and the trace (Stibbe, 2014) as follows:

1. The Void:

The void is where the natural world is completely absent or not mentioned by a discourse (Stibbe, 2014: 586). In the beginning of the sampling process, the researchers have found that 67% (70 out of 104) of the discourses erased entirely the discussion about environment. Only 33% of the discourses on the website explicitly mentioned environment. However, in the analysis process, five

Silenced Forest: Erasure of Non-Human Life in Government Discourse on IKN
Famala Eka Sanhadi Rahayu, Muhammad Hasyim, Muhammad Bahri Arifin
DOI

373

articles erased the discussion of the natural environment, let alone non-human life (IKN3; IKN5; IKN9; IKN28; IKN30). Furthermore, in other articles, animals and plants are not mentioned explicitly which means they are erased from the discourses related to IKN.

2. **The Mask**

The mask is where 'something important' is represented in discourse but distortedly as a 'mask' which erases its true nature (Stibbe, 2014: 586). As stated in the previous section, there are 34 articles which include the word 'environment' or 'environmental' as the inclusive criteria for being the data source. In addition, it is also revealed that the term 'environment' or 'environmental' does not always talk about the natural environment when biotic and abiotic elements live together. The term environment in the discourse frequently talks about the environment in another realm which can be seen from the collocation when the words environment or environmental are used together, as displayed in the quotation:

> Therefore, all eyes will be on Indonesia, whether we are able to carry out this project successfully while also adhering to **environmental friendliness** and low carbon emission targets. There are so many things related to the environment that become the main part of preparing both the IKN's Masterplan and the detailed plans," remarked the Minister of National Development Planning/Head of Bappenas Suharso Monoarfa. (IKN11)

From the quotation above, it can be seen that the word 'environment' is collocated with the word 'friendliness' which has nothing to do with the natural environment. Here, the word 'environmental' is to depict a place for human to live in. From the very first data, it can be seen that the government discourse related to IKN is **anthropocentric, which leads to the perception of the readers that nature exists** for human well-being (McIntyre-Mills & McIntyre-Mills, 2014; Ross, 2020). This assumption is strengthened by the following quotation:

> "We want Nusantara Capital to have **a complete ecosystem**, not only public facilities or government offices but also places for MSMEs, **hangout places, standup comedy venues, or sports venues**. This is what we want to create so that this city is not only **livable** but also **lovable**."(IKN31)

The aforementioned quotation begins by describing a complete ecosystem. An ecosystem is a place where living and nonliving

Silenced Forest: Erasure of Non-Human Life in Government Discourse on IKN
Famala Eka Sanhadi Rahayu, Muhammad Hasyim, Muhammad Bahri Arifin
DOI

374

creatures live side by side create an interconnected relationship. However, the phrase 'a complete ecosystem' is instead of using the word 'ecosystem' to depict in a place in which non-human live is also part of it, it is used to describe a place for human to live. It can be seen from the next following phrases which stated 'hangout places, standup comedy venues, or sports venues'. All of these places are for fulfilling human necessities and desires. Other living creatures are not into their consideration at all. This perception is supported by the quotation below:

> With the concept of **'living with nature'**, we want to make sure that we implement the Forest City plan with utmost care and success. To do so, we plan to fit the new State Capital with many open spaces to reduce the **environmental footprint**. (IKN12)

The above quotation stated that IKN will be developed with the concept of 'living with nature' however, in the next sentences, there is no single mention of other living things such as animals or plants. Animals and plants are mentioned only in three articles where the government explain flood mitigation in Pulau Pisau (IKN6), tree planting in the Miniature Tropical Rainforest of Nusantara in IKN (IKN24), and participation in Global Environmental Campain (IKN26). Moreover, animals and plants are often masked through the use of metaphor (Stibbe, 2014) as presented in these quotations:

> Regarding the environment, one of the emerging concerns involves the future of the forest area. Minister Suharso emphasized that the sustainability of Kalimantan's forests, known as the **'lungs of the world'**, would be the main focus of the development, considering that the IKN Masterplan itself has even mandated that 75% of the new city must be 'green areas', with the principle of being a 'forest city'.(IKN14)

The same metaphor is also mentioned in different discourses as follow:

> Minister Suharso also emphasized the importance of considering the environmental aspects that come with developing such a mammoth project, especially due to Kalimantan Island's role as the **'lungs of the world'**. (IKN13)

These two quotations contain the identical metaphor "lungs of the world" which refers to Kalimantan's forests. Using this metaphor to describe various species living there is too shallow.

3. The Trace

Silenced Forest: Erasure of Non-Human Life in Government Discourse on IKN
Famala Eka Sanhadi Rahayu, Muhammad Hasyim, Muhammad Bahri Arifin
DOI

375

The trace is when discourses represent the natural world but do so in a way that obscures it, leaving a faint trace rather than a vivid image (Stibbe, 2014: 589). Erasure is not a binary all-or-nothing phenomenon and can occur to different degrees. Of particular importance is the 'trace'- when discourses represent the natural world but do so in a way which obscure, leaving a faint trace rather than a vivid image. The example of 'trace' can be seen from the following quotations:

> It should be noted that NCA is part of the **biodiversity** hotspot in Indonesia with **a high level of endemism**. This document includes data on remaining ecosystems, habitats and species, as well as 7 biodiversity protection programs with the hope of achieving Nature Positive in NCA by increasing **biodiversity populations** and types by 2030.(IKN27)

Although there are some explicit statements such as 'biodiversity', 'endemism' and 'biodiversity population', the discourse erases animals and plants and the natural world, turn them into a faint trace that is unlikely to arouse people's imagination or care. In ecolinguistics, the more abstract the thing, the higher the degree of erasure (Stibbe, 2014). The examples of how erasure in the form of trace are applied in different degrees can be observed in the following quotations:

> "The 'heart of Kalimantan' is in our territory and is very rich in biodiversity, with 50% of the **world's flora and fauna species** being found there.(IKN5)

From the quotation above, the discourse explicitly stated "world's flora and fauna species" without being followed by the name of the species which can bring a vivid representation in the people's mind. These discourses would impact differently if they added several endemic species, such as orangutans, bekantans, black orchids, gaharu trees, and kelulut bees. It would make more vivid representations. However, in the discourse related to IKN development, nature only acts as a place and resource for human well-being; therefore, there is no need to give vivid representations of nature in the government discourse. The previous used the hypernym of the species, that is flora and fauna which cannot evoke the traits that those living things have. The higher degree of erasure can be found in the following excerpt:

> This concept is considered to be the best approach to develop the new State Capital considering the IKN's future location will be on the island

Silenced Forest: Erasure of Non-Human Life in Government Discourse on IKN
Famala Eka Sanhadi Rahayu, Muhammad Hasyim, Muhammad Bahri Arifin
DOI

376

of Kalimantan, which holds **abundant tropical rainforest and various ecological traits**. (IKN11)

The following excerpt uses more abstract representation than the previous one. While the previous one used fauna and flora to represent the endemic species, the quotation above (IKN11) used abundant tropical rainforest and various ecological traits, which removed all flora and fauna traits and gathered them into a collective phrase "abundant tropical rainforest and various ecological traits" which shows nothing but the place where those fauna and flora live. The most obscure way to erase non-human life is when the discourses use the word 'green' in every strategy that the government do when developing IKN, such as 'green concept', 'green area' ', greenspace' and 'green city'. The example of the use of the word green in the most abstract way is presented in the following excerpt:

> Regarding the environment, one of the emerging concerns involves the future of the forest area. Minister Suharso emphasized that the sustainability of Kalimantan's forests, known as the 'lungs of the world', would be the main focus of the development, considering that the IKN Masterplan itself has even mandated that 75% of the new city must be **'green areas'**, with the principle of being a 'forest city'. (IKN13)

The similar strategy is used in the following discourse:

> "The development of Nusantara with a sustainable and **green concept** is an attraction in the 21st century and will undoubtedly receive a lot of support from the wider community, including us," said Sally.
> (IKN29)

The word 'green' in the discourses is used to create public opinion that IKN will be an eco—friendly city. This justification is needed when there is considerable debate and controversy relating to the issue of relocating and developing IKN from environmentalists. By spreading the tagline of 'green' concept, the government managed to calm down the wave of objections due to environmental issues. This strategy can be categorized as greenwashing. Greenwashing refers to the practice of falsely promoting an organization's environmental efforts or spending more resources to promote the organization as green than are spent to actually engage in environmentally sound practices (Becker-Olsen and Potucek, 2013). However, in Indonesian government discourses related to IKN the erasure is the impact of the use of greenwashing strategies. The term green is associated with symbolic action in which the

Silenced Forest: Erasure of Non-Human Life in Government Discourse on IKN
Famala Eka Sanhadi Rahayu, Muhammad Hasyim, Muhammad Bahri Arifin
DOI

377

government try to defect attention to minor issues or lead to create 'green talk' through statements aimed at satisfying stakeholder requirements in terms of sustainability but without any concrete action (Siano et al, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study revealed a systematic erasure of non-human life through the mechanism of the void, the mask and the trace. These linguistic strategies significantly weaken ecological consciousness, prioritizing anthropocentric narratives that minimize the ecological realities of urban development. To promote true environmental sustainability, authorities must use language that includes biodiversity in public communication. This will encourage more people to get involved in protecting the environment. Future studies should examine how the public and stakeholders react to and understand these kinds of government speeches and how they affect people's attitudes and behaviours toward the environment.

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Silenced Forest: Erasure of Non-Human Life in Government Discourse on IKN
Famala Eka Sanhadi Rahayu, Muhammad Hasyim, Muhammad Bahri Arifin
DOI

378

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Silenced Forest: Erasure of Non-Human Life in Government Discourse on IKN
Famala Eka Sanhadi Rahayu, Muhammad Hasyim, Muhammad Bahri Arifin
DOI

379